

LANDMARK DESIGNATION REPORT

LANDMARK/SITE NAME:The Sterling-Berry House
OWNER:Mr. J. Gary Trichter
APPLICANT:Mr. Chris Samuelson, for J. Gary Trichter
LOCATION:4515 Yoakum Boulevard
30-DAY HEARING NOTICE:September 8, 1996

AGENDA ITEM:IVa
MEETING DATE:Oct-10-96
HPO FILE NO.:96L009
DATE ACCEPTED:Sept-04-96
HEARING DATE:Oct-10-96

SITE INFORMATION

Tracts 7A and 8, Block 1, Rossmoyne Subdivision, City of Houston, Harris County, Texas. The main building on the site is a massively scaled, two-story house constructed of hollow tile blocks on a reinforced concrete foundation and is faced with red brick laid in common bond. The restored home is situated on the northeast corner of Yoakum Boulevard and Kenwood Street. A two-story, two-car garage of brick harmonizes in detail with the house. The garage is not restored. A glass and metal-frame greenhouse formerly attached to the south elevation of the garage has been demolished.

TYPE OF APPROVAL REQUESTED:Landmark Designation for the two-story, red brick house at 4515 Yoakum.

HISTORY AND SIGNIFICANCE:

The Sterling-Berry House was built in 1916, although perhaps completed in 1917, the year that it was first known to have been occupied by the Sterling family. The design and construction are attributed to the Russell Brown Company. In 1919, the original occupants retained Alfred C. Finn to add the front porch. It was Finn's designer, H. Jordan MacKenzie, who produced the spectacular front porch. He incorporated in his design a wide-span, reinforced concrete structure bracketed by a cantilevered canopy on the north end and an inglenook on the south, framed by a bulbous concrete column. Centered above the front step is MacKenzie's signature device, an elongated cartouche. The progressive tendencies displayed in Finn's addition to the Sterling Home were apparent in only a few other commissions, all of which dated from this period. The Humble Oil and Refining Company Station No. 4, the first service station to be built by that company, was designed by Finn in 1918. There he allied reinforced-concrete construction and Art Nouveau cast-stone ornamentation. This sort of ornament was applied to other commercial projects by Finn, but apparently not to any other residential work.

Known as the "Builder of Houston," Finn also designed such projects as the Gulf Building, the San Jacinto Monument, the Sam Houston Coliseum, Sakowitz Brothers Store, Bankers Mortgage Building, State National Bank Building, the Commerce Building extension, U of H Ezekiel W. Cullen Administration Building, Lamar Hotel, Lowe's Theatre, Metropolitan Theatre and the Shrine Crippled Children's Hospital.

The Sterling-Berry House is an unusual example in Houston of the progressive architecture of the early 20th century, especially that which emanated from the Middle West. The big scale, symmetrical composition, and especially the employment of reinforced concrete to permit wide-span openings can be related to the work of such architects as George W. Maher and Louis S. Custiss of Kansas City. Ornament based upon languid abstractions of floral patterns was typical of the art Nouveau of France and Belgium, which can be seen in the architectural ornament of Curtiss in particular, whose best known building in Texas is the Tarrant County Courthouse in Fort Worth. The use of reinforced concrete construction in domestic architecture was rare; even more so in architectural articulation. The unusual treatment of ornament and the manneristic detailing of

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columns, canopies, planters and parapet walls called attention to the novel construction technique employed on the porch of the house.

The original occupant, Ross Shaw Sterling (1875-1949), was born in Anahuac, Texas. After investing in the grain and feed business and banking, he moved to Houston in 1905. His accumulated wealth led him to investing in the fledgling oil business, later forming the Humble Oil Company in 1911, of which he became president. In 1917 he reorganized the company to form the Humble Oil and Refining Company. He served as president from 1917 to 1922 and chairman of the board of directors from 1922 until 1925. He also invested heavily in real estate. After he purchased a large tract of land in southwest Houston, he sold part of it to the Houston Land Corporation in 1910 for the development of the Montrose Subdivision. In 1914, he and his siblings, Frank Prior Sterling and Florence Sterling formed the R. S. Sterling Investment Company. They developed the remaining portion into a residential development, which Sterling called Rossmoyne, where he built this house on Rossmoyne Boulevard, later known as Yoakum Boulevard in 1960. Rossmoyne was laid out by Houston architect, George H. Fruehling. It was an enclave neighborhood based on the St. Louis, private-place type first used in Houston for the layout of Courtlandt Place in 1907. Rossmoyne consisted of a central, esplanaded boulevard three blocks long, onto which the large houses faced.

The construction of the house is attributed to the Russell Brown Company. Lending credibility to this assumption is the fact that the detailing of the sunporch windows are very much like those found in Mr. Brown's own home in Westmoreland. Russell Brown (c. 1877-1963) organized the Russell Brown Company in 1908 and remained extremely active in residential construction after World War II. Real estate advertisements in the Houston Daily Post for June 11 and 18, 1916 noted that they had houses under construction in Rossmoyne. However, it is also known that in 1917 Sterling had another Houston builder, E. L. Crain and Company, build speculative houses in Rossmoyne. It is documented that in 1934 and 1938 the second owner of the present house, Joel H. Berry, retained the Russell Brown Company to remodel the house.

Ross Sterling later became involved in varied civic matters, including the Harris County-Houston Ship Channel Navigation District Board. In 1924, he bought the Houston Post, the oldest paper in Houston, and consolidated it with another newspaper to form the Houston Post Dispatch, which subsequently became the Houston Post. An extension of this enterprise was the inauguration in 1925 of KPRC, Houston's first commercial radio station. He also had interest or served in various capacities with Houston National Bank, Hermann Hospital, and the Americian Maid Flour Mill. He later entered Texas politics, first as chairman of the Texas Highway Commission from 1927 to 1930 and then as Governor of Texas from 1931 to 1932.

The home at 4515 Yoakum was eventually sold in 1934 to Joel H. Berry (1890-1952), a respected Houston banker, lawyer and civic leader. He was also a member of the Houston City Council and became Mayor Pro-tempore of Houston (1924-1944) while his wife used her gardening talents to beautify the property, which was often the site of garden club meetings.

The Sterling-Berry House is a symmetrically composed, two-story house with a U-shaped plan that was constructed in 1916. It is constructed with a hip roof, of wood construction, and is clad with red clay tiles. The most distinctive architectural feature of the house is the front porch, which was added three years after construction of the house. It is of reinforced concrete, and is partly clad with brick in two tones of red and a third tone of black, and with white cement plaster and cast-stone decoration. The porch projects forward of the west elevation of the house above a front doorway with sets of windows at each side. The low porch border, the lintel of the opening, and the stepped parapet of the second-floor terrace above are all outlined with cast-stone copings. At the north end of the porch, a cantilevered, concrete canopy projects above a set of brick steps

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flanked by concrete parapet walls, and serves as a porte-cochere. At the south end of the porch, compositionally balancing the porte-cochere, is another extension in the form of a flat canopy supported by two massive, overscaled concrete columns framing a semicircular seating bay just outside a sun porch on the south side of the house. Centered on the west face of the porch, just above the main steps, is a cast-stone cartouche. Cast-stone, floral arabesques of Art Nouveau character decorate the semicircular planter boxes at the bases of the two porch piers, the brackets supporting the porte-cochere canopy, and the parapet walls of the porte-cochere steps and the seating bay.

The front entrance is set in a recessed alcove within the salient, central bay of the west elevation. A wide, wood-framed door containing beveled-glass lights is flanked by a pair of side lights. Access to the second-floor terrace is through a pair of French doors set in another alcove just above the front door. The front porch is accessible also from the sun porch, through a pair of wood-framed French doors. French doors at the east end of the living room lead to a simple loggia supported on a pair of brick piers at the south end of the east elevation of the house. This seems to have the original porte-cochere. The service porch on the north end of the east elevation of the house also has an outside entrance.

Most of the windows in the Sterling-Berry House are wood-framed, sliding-sash units with one-over-one lights. On the west elevation, the salient central bay is flanked by a pair of bays, each of which contains a wide, central window flanked by narrower windows on both the first and second floors. A wide, low dormer located above the central bay on the west elevation contains three wooden casements, each divided into long, narrow lights by thin glazing bars. The south-facing sun porch, which is glazed on the west, south (Kenwood Street) and east elevations, contains casement windows. The horizontal glazing bars of these windows are arced in the center.

The hip roof contains the central dormers on the west and east. Eave lines are unbroken and project far beyond the faces of the walls on all sides. These are supported by wooden brackets, painted white as are the soffits of the eaves and resemble those of Italian villas. A brick chimney is centered on the south side of the main block of the house and serves the living room fireplace, while a second chimney serves the kitchen and the basement.

RESTORATION HISTORY/CURRENT CONDITION:

From the time of its construction in 1916 until 1981, the home was used as a single-family residence. In 1981 the house was partially rehabilitated under the direction of Stem Associates, Inc., Architects, to serve as their offices. The ground floor was repaired and cleaned, and the exterior was restored to its condition of 1919. On the sleeping porch above the sun porch, the original screening had been replaced previously by aluminum-framed windows. In 1981, these were replaced by wood-framed windows that repeat the glazing-bar patterns of the sunporch windows. The home today is used by the present owner as both a residence and law office. The only alteration to the building that the current owner has made is a second-floor canvas awning to shade the upper balcony. At one time, canvas awnings were utilized on the building. The existing awning is compatible and as constructed, can be removed if desired at a future date without damaging the building.

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STAFF RECOMMENDATION:

Recommends that the Houston Archaeological and Historical Commission recommends designation of Sterling-Berry House as a landmark to the Planning Commission since the application complies with the applicable criteria of Section 33-224.

APPROVAL CRITERIA FOR LANDMARK DESIGNATION....:

Sec. 33-224. Criteria for designation of a Landmark.

(a) The HAHC and the commission, in making recommendations with respect to designation, and the city council, in making a designation, shall consider one or more of the following criteria, as appropriate for the type of designation:

S	D	NA		S - satisfies	D - does not satisfy	NA - not applicable
☒	☐	☐	(1) Whether the building, structure, object, site or area possesses character, interest or value as a visible reminder of the development, heritage, and cultural and ethnic diversity of the city, state, or nation;			
☐	☐	☒	(2) Whether the building, structure, object, site or area is the location of a significant local, state or national event;			
☐	☐	☒	(3) Whether the building, structure, object, site or area is identified with a person who, or group or event that, contributed significantly to the cultural or historical development of the city, state, or nation;			
☒	☐	☐	(4) Whether the building or structure or the buildings or structures within the area exemplify particular architectural style or building type important to the city;			
☒	☐	☐	(5) Whether the building or structure or the buildings or structures within the area are the best remaining examples of an architectural style or building type in a neighborhood;			
☒	☐	☐	(6) Whether the building, structure, object or site or the buildings, structures, objects or sites within the area are identified as the work of a person or group whose work has influenced the heritage of the city, state, or nation;			
☐	☐	☒	(7) Whether specific evidence exists that unique archaeological resources are present;			
☐	☐	☒	(8) Whether the building, structure, object or site has value as a significant element of community sentiment or public pride.			

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SITE LOCATION MAP
4515 YOAKUM BOULEVARD
NOT TO SCALE

